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KEVIN P. COUGHLIN / For The Inquirer

Author Nick Tosches in an office at the Time Life Building in New York. In his novel, he heaps scorn on AOL Time Warner, which owns his publisher, calling it the "Moloch of mediocrity."

Hand in hand with Dante

TOSCHES from H1

ing an original manuscript of *The Divine Comedy* stolen from the Vatican library by a bunch of trigger-happy goodfellas and their literary-minded pal, "Nick Tosches."

It is in the voice of that character that Tosches tells us he killed another child when he was 6 years old, that he fears that being diagnosed with diabetes after a lifetime of boozing means that he is not long for this world, and that he faked his own death in the World Trade Center collapse last year. Oh, and that he regards AOL Time Warner as "the Moloch of mediocrity."

"The Bob Cratchits of yesterday," he writes of the publishing industry, "are the tyrants of today ... staring at the momentary bottom line while Harry Potter and the next Faulkner alike pass by them unnoticed."

Still, Tosches can't help feeling "like I got away, for once, with writing exactly what I wanted to write, and have it be embraced by a publisher."

Indeed, Tosches' publisher and longtime editor Michael Pietsch remains an ardent supporter of his author, praising *In the Hand* as "a wild beast of a novel."

"The satisfaction for me was saying what I had to say," says Tosches. "But after I sent it to [Little, Brown], there was a long pause. And then I think they decided, 'Let's come out with it. It'll be obvious that we're big on free speech, and what better thing.'

"See, you can bite the hand that feeds you, but how do you bite a machine? You wind up with a mouth full of metal and plastic. They'll always come up with a sound bite they can sell it with. How about this?" he says with a laugh. " 'He hates us!' "

Tosches, an Italian-Irish bartender's son, grew up in Newark, N.J., and Lower Manhattan, where he lives alone. "I can tell a book is good when I lose somebody. This one's good because I lost two. I had two girlfriends dump me, one here and one in Paris."

In the neighborhoods where Tosches spent his childhood, there were "few books, many bookies." His father discouraged him from reading, for fear that "it would put ideas in my head."

"It was an environment where things were expressed harshly, or not at all," he recalls. The impulse to write "was born out of a fear to communicate verbally and face anybody with what you're feeling." The courage came from reading Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* when he was 25. The junkies-and-prostitutes tale "made me think that if he can write like this, I don't feel alienated from literature anymore."

Tosches never went to college, and says he spent his youth as a bartender, petty thief and paste-up artist for the Lovable Underwear Co. His knowledge of Latin, Greek and Italian is largely self-taught. In books such as 1988's streetwise novel *Cut Numbers* and this year's nonfiction *The Last Opium Den*, he makes it clear that his education is equal parts experience with life's underbelly and exhaustive reading.

In the introduction to *The Nick Tosches Reader* (2000), in a passage recast in *In the Hand*, he writes: "Sometimes they seemed so close, the wise guys and the men of wisdom. 'I don't do thoughts,' said Eddie D. from the projects. 'The Great Tao,' said Ch'an Buddhist Master Niu-t'ou Fa-Yung thirteen centuries earlier, 'is free from thought.' So close and yet so far."

Tosches began as a music writer in the early 1970s in New York with drinking buddies Lester Bangs, who died in 1982, and Richard Meltzer, who Tosches says stole from him the title to the 2000 collection *A Whore Just Like the Rest*.

From his first book, 1977's *Country: The Twisted Roots of Rock 'n' Roll*, to 2000's *The Devil and Sonny Liston*, about the fearsome pugilist Tosches believes to have thrown his title fights with Muhammad Ali, Tosches has obsessed over outlaws ignored or held in contempt by the emasculating mainstream, wild men with the power to deliver forbidden thrills.

He feels "like I got away, for once, with writing exactly what I wanted to write."

Tosches is more easygoing in person than on the page. But his tough-customer image doesn't fall far from that of his heroes.

Back in the day, "booze was always my ticket to oblivion," says the writer with the weathered face, whose health is "amazingly, pretty good."

"I never took cocaine other than to stay up to drink some more. But booze occupied a lot of years of my life." Binges came between books, not during them. "I've never worked under the influence of anything. I can't. The work wouldn't be good. Besides, when I'm drinking, all I want to do is drink."

So how much of the "Nick Tosches" story is autobiographical?

"I tell you, a lot of it," he says. "It's not a work of nonfiction. But my voice is mostly real. A lot of it is opening up my sternum, realizing how old I was, and trying to write something real."

The part about his teenage daughter being murdered is true, Tosches says. How about stabbing a kid to death with a knife when he was 6? "Accidentally, something happened. Let's just say it dramatized it. Not that much, though."

Tosches does suffer from diabetes, for which he takes insulin daily, and he's cut down to two glasses of red wine a day. He still uses heroin, he says, but only "two or three times a year." And while he misses the boozy ride to oblivion "a lot, I also remember the ride back. That's a pretty good prophylactic."

Martin Scorsese controls the film rights to *Dino: Living High in the Dirty Business of Dreams* (1992), and for a time Tom Hanks' name was attached to the movie. "I wouldn't go see the goddamn thing, to tell you the truth," Tosches says of the project, which is on the back burner.

Along with George Jones, the subject of a definitive profile in the *Reader*, Dean Martin is an example of Tosches' digging deep into the cultural import of characters clueless about their own significance.

"For any subject to be interesting to me," he says, "there has to be this mystery there that I can feel inside me. And if I can just uncover it, it's like a revelation."

With *In the Hand*, Tosches sets up Dante as his own alter ego, a suffering rebel frustrated by the strictures of the terza rima verse form of his great poem, and sick of his craft, just as Tosches reflexively trashes his own ornamental prose.

"I love Dante," says Tosches, who's been working on and off on a translation of the *Commedia*. "Over the last 700 years he's been deified. I wanted to write about him as a human being."

Whether it's Dante, Martin or Emmett Miller, the shadowy blackface singer at the core of last year's minstrelsy musing *Where Dead Voices Gather*, Tosches' trademark is to hunt for the true in a world where the authentic is in short supply.

"T.S. Eliot said that any man who thinks he has a new idea simply hasn't been around," he says of his storytelling strategy. "But if you can go back as close as possible to the origin of anything, you usually find it at its most pure and most powerful. And that in turn will give you a sense of purity. Then it's down to what Ezra Pound said: 'Make it new.' "

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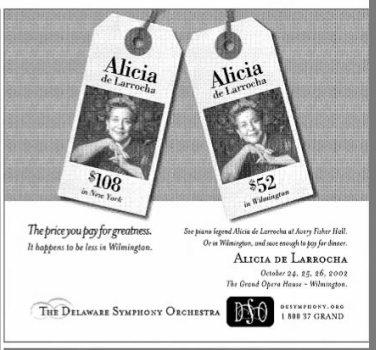

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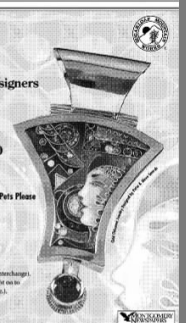

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